

## Union College Union | Digital Works

---

Honors Theses

Student Work

---

6-2018

# Nasty Women: Television Portrayals of Societal Anxieties toward Female Leaders

Emily Sullivan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalworks.union.edu/theses>



Part of the [Leadership Studies Commons](#), [Political Theory Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Sullivan, Emily, "Nasty Women: Television Portrayals of Societal Anxieties toward Female Leaders" (2018). *Honors Theses*. 1679.  
<https://digitalworks.union.edu/theses/1679>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at Union | Digital Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Union | Digital Works. For more information, please contact [digitalworks@union.edu](mailto:digitalworks@union.edu).

Nasty Women:  
Television Portrayals of Societal Anxieties toward Female Leaders

By  
Emily Sullivan

\* \* \* \* \*

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for  
Honors in the Department of Political Science

UNION COLLEGE

June, 2018

## ABSTRACT

SULLIVAN, EMILY

Nasty Women: Television Portrayals of Societal Anxieties  
of Female Leadership

Department of Political Science, June 2018

ADVISOR: Lori Marso

Historically, women have been excluded from leadership positions around the world, while instead men occupy the highest positions of power in society. The lack of female leadership is especially prevalent in the United States, where there has never been a female president, and the majority of high political offices are still held by men. In a similar manner, women have also been excluded from the sphere of comedy throughout history. Women have constantly had to deal with the assertion that women are not funny. This double exclusion from both leadership and comedy has led to the development of my concept of the nasty woman, who is a woman who seeks to hold a leadership position in a way that patriarchal society deems threatening to the status quo. The nasty woman does not conform to societal expectations because she seeks to ensure that women do not have to only follow the traditional path that are set for them, paths that exclude leadership roles.

Although there are many examples of nasty women in the real world, I chose to analyze Selina Meyer from *Veep* and Leslie Knope from *Parks and Recreation* as portrayals of the societal anxieties about nasty women, or female leaders, on comedy television shows. Selina acts as an example of a terrible leader, while Leslie acts as an example of an amazing leader. However, both of these women still cause society to experience anxiety because of their decisions and actions as female leaders. The fear of

these women exists because, by seeking to obtain leadership positions in society, they are going against the traditional roles that society expects women to play. Overall, the portrayals of both Selina and Leslie represent three main anxieties that society has about female leaders: the fear that women are incompetent, uncontrollable, and altogether bad leaders, the fear that women leaders will abandon traditional feminine roles, and the fear that female leaders will castrate the men around them. With the portrayal of these ideas in comedy shows, the representations of Selina and Leslie emphasize the ridiculous and hilarity of these negative expectations of female leaders in a way that undermines the negative perceptions of female leaders in the United States today.

## Table of Contents

Title Page.....	i
Abstract.....	ii-iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Introduction.....	1-10
Chapter One: Female Leaders versus the Fears of the “Axis of Dick”.....	11-29
Chapter Two: Fear of Abandonment of Traditional Gender Roles.....	30-46
Chapter Three: Men who Fear Castration.....	47-59
Conclusion.....	60-61
Bibliography.....	62-66

## Acknowledgements

To Professor Lori Marso, for being such an inspiration throughout my years at Union and for always challenging me to think outside the norm. When other students say that I remind them of you, I know that I've done something right.

To my mom, for always being there when I need her, and for reading me inspiring quotes when I need some words of encouragement.

And to all the nasty women out there. Never back down. Keeping fighting for what you believe in and you will change the world for the better.

## Introduction

On October 19, 2016, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump participated in the final debate of the 2016 Presidential Election. On this day, Trump infamously interrupted Clinton to denounce her as “Such a nasty woman” (Berenson). With these words, Trump unintentionally launched a feminist movement, in which feminists all over the country re-appropriated this phrase in order to make the term nasty woman a positive one. After Trump’s interruption, “the reaction on social media was near instantaneous. #NastyWoman began trending on Twitter. Within minutes, nastywomengetshitdone.com redirected to Hillary Clinton’s official website. Within an hour, Nasty Woman T-shirts — with proceeds benefitting Planned Parenthood — were available for purchase” (Gray). This movement has enabled the nasty woman to be taken as a feminist icon rather than the denunciation that Trump might have intended it to be. The title of one *Bustle* article says it all: “I Am A Nasty Woman” Is The Female Empowerment Message Donald Trump Didn't Mean To Inspire” (Hollander). The nasty woman became a phenomenon that inspires women every day to fight back against patriarchal discrimination and prove that the so-called nasty women of society will not let men define who they are.

In the past, scholars have also taken seemingly negative terms that have been applied to women and applied them to women in a more constructive and positive way. In particular, Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, in her books *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* and *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers*, discusses the concept of the unruly woman within film and television. She defines her “unruly woman” and the unruliness of women as:

A cluster of attributes that challenge patriarchal power by defying norms of femininity intended to keep a woman in her place. The unruly woman creates disorder by dominating men and refusing to confine herself to her proper place. Her body is excessive, especially in terms of fatness, and her speech breaks conventions of female decorum. She may be androgynous, drawing attention to the social construction of gender by exaggerating or challenging its signifiers. She may be old, a masculinized crone who refuses to become invisible. Her behavior is defined by looseness, including sexually, and she may be pregnant. Associated with dirt, liminality, and taboo, she is above all a figure of the grotesque (Karlyn 10).

The unruly woman threatens society; she does not allow for herself to be pushed to the side strictly because men expect her to move. However, she also partially exists out of society by being part of the carnivalesque. As Karlyn describes, “The unruly woman often enjoys a reprieve from those fates that so often seem inevitable to women under the patriarchy, because her home is comedy and the carnivalesque, the realm of inversion and fantasy where, for a time at least, the ordinary world can be stood on its head” (Karlyn 11).

With inspiration from the unruly woman, I seek to assign my own definition to the concept of the nasty woman. The nasty woman is a woman who seeks or holds a leadership position in patriarchal society. She does not allow for men to dictate how she acts while in office. By holding a political leadership position, she works within the confines of societal structures, which in itself has the potential to enact change because women do not always get the opportunity to lead in patriarchal societies. Unlike the unruly woman, the nasty woman does not only exist in the realm of fantasy and the carnivalesque; she is real and can enact real change because her very existence as a leader challenges the established system. Because of her potential to change the structure of



society, she causes anxiety in society, resulting from the seemingly simple fact that she is a woman in an influential position of power. The patriarchy is entirely unsure what she is capable of so it fears and denounces her; it wants her to fail.

Although both the unruly woman and the nasty woman are fictional concepts, they can still be applied to the actual experiences of women in the real world, like with Hillary Clinton, as well as fictional representations of women. In the traditional roles of patriarchal society, both the unruly woman and the nasty woman have been cast aside for going against the norm. In general, this concept of exclusion can also be applied to women in comedy and women in leadership roles. Society says that women are not funny just as society says women are not leaders. Sevda Caliskan explains in her essay *Is There Such Thing as Female Humor*, “traditionally speaking, women and humor are quite incompatible categories...the tendency to regard literary humor as a distinctly male province still predominates” (Caliskan 49). Women have either been excluded from humor or, when they do participate in the comedy genre, are forced to demean themselves and make jokes about their own gender in order to be seen as funny to men. By creating their own branch of humor, women’s humor, women can potentially subvert the expectation of the patriarchy in regard to both comedy and traditional, societal expectations that are associated with women. In regard to this notion, Caliskan describes how women’s humor, or humor performed by women, can be subversive to dominant ideologies:

On the surface, the text is in compliant with the dominant culture and its values, particularly those about women, but it also works at a subtextual level which simultaneously unsays what it seems to say only superficially. This strategy is particularly convenient at times when women’s roles in

society are strictly defined by patriarchy and when women themselves are acculturated into willingly fitting these roles” (Caliskan 54).

The subtext within the works of female humor therefore works to undermine patriarchal expectations of women. By portraying traditional womanly roles in an exaggerated and comedic way, women point out the ridiculousness of societal beliefs about women without blatantly denouncing the entire structure of society. This technique presents itself as a way for women to imperceptibly chip away at patriarchal structures bit by bit so that eventually the bigger flaws of the patriarchy will be revealed to the public.

Furthermore, throughout history and today, women’s relation to comedy has been that of the punch line of a joke. They are not expected to be the one telling jokes, but rather are expected to be laughed at. This existence as the punch line stems from social conditions that teach women to not have the character traits that comedy requires. As Caliskan points out, “To be funny is to be assertive, aggressive, and forceful; that is, everything a ‘good girl’ is not supposed to be” (Caliskan 52). The notion that women cannot be funny is strongly represented by the ideas of Christopher Hitchens. In January 2007, Hitchens wrote the infamous piece in *Vanity Fair* entitled “Why Women Aren’t Funny”. In this piece, he asserts that the most important thing in the life of a woman is bearing children, meaning, “In other words, for women the question of funniness is essentially a secondary one. They are innately aware of a higher calling that is no laughing matter” (Hitchens). Not only is this a general assumption about women, but it also confines women to the traditional standard that all they are useful for is having children and nothing else. As I will explain later on, this is simply not true. Many female writers and comedians, including Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, have responded to his essay

to make it clear that women are in fact funny and that Hitchens makes mass generalizations about the relation between gender and humor that are not actually based on fact (Stanley).

In regard to female leadership, women have always been excluded from, or occupied very few, leadership positions throughout history. Even as far back as 1558, Scottish reformer John Knox declared his opposition to the female leadership of Queen Elizabeth I and Mary Queen of Scots in his treatise *First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (Knox). In this essay, Knox insists that female leaders go against the natural order of society and they will therefore lead to its destruction. Specifically in the United States, for the most part, men run the country. Based on a report by Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox in 2011, women made up 17.0% of United States senators, 16.9% of members of the U.S House of Representatives, 12.0% of state governors, 22.4% of statewide elected officials, 23.6% of state legislators, and 8.0% of mayors of the 100 largest cities in the United States (Fox and Lawless 1). And, of course, there have been no female presidents in the history of the United States. With that being said, there are women in leadership positions, and the number of female leaders has definitely begun to rise from a historical standpoint, especially with the prominence of Hillary Clinton, but the highest positions in the government are still typically held by men. The Center for American Progress describes the increases in female political representation in 2012:

After a series of historic wins, 40 percent of Americans now have at least one woman representing them in the U.S. Senate, and there are no longer any male-only state legislatures. New Hampshire, notably, sent an all-female delegation to Congress and elected a female governor. Six

additional women of color were elected to the House of Representatives, bringing their total number in Congress to a record 28. Female candidates were shown to raise as much money, and to be as successful in their election bids, as male candidates running for public office (Warner).

This increased representation of female leaders in politics offers a step in the right direction, but there are still much fewer women in positions of political power in the United States as compared to men and a stigma still exists against female leaders.

The connection between exclusion from comedy and exclusion from leadership is evident in comedy television shows which portray female leaders. It is these shows that do the most to portray the nasty woman. Relating back to the Caliskan's concept of the subversive nature of women's humor, women in comedy television can also use their characters to undermine the expectations of the patriarchy, even if on the surface it appears as if they are fitting within the confines of patriarchal expectations. Women who play characters in satiric television shows can make their characters as ridiculously stereotypical as possible, but the point is that they are humorous, and oftentimes humor is not taken seriously. However, these shows do cause viewers to think: Why are women portrayed in these ways? Why is it so funny? What do these portrayals mean for the reality of women in patriarchal society? These questions are what undermine patriarchal expectations in society; viewers laugh at women in comedy, but they also start to think about the bigger picture.

Also, in comedies, nasty woman combat the notion that women cannot be funny and that women cannot be leaders by taking advantage of the revolutionary power of laughter, a concept that is analyzed in Jo Ann Isaak's *Feminism & Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*. Isaak asserts that laughter "is meant to

be thought of as a metaphor for transformation, for thinking about cultural change” (Isaak 5). This is not a new theory, as theorists in the past have also asserted that laughter holds the power to promote societal change. Sigmund Freud’s essay on humor described the rebellious nature of laughter in 1927 and even as early as Renaissance times French humanist Francois Rabelais described laughter as having the power to “disrupt the authority of the church and state” (Isaak 15). These descriptions of laughter underscore the fact that humor has the power to make change by pointing out the flaws of existing institutions of power in order to emphasize that these systems are no longer a viable or logical way to maintain society.

In general, laughter acts as a form of disruption; it interrupts actions and cuts off thoughts that maintain the status quo. Women’s use of laughter undermines the system that keeps them oppressed. Women in comedy use the laughter that they provoke to denounce their situation under the patriarchy. The portrayal of female leaders in comedy especially uses this denunciation through laughter in order to deconstruct the argument that they are expected to fail as political leaders strictly based on the fact that they are women. By using laughter to undermine the system, females in comedies seek to rewrite the history of power that has dictated that they are inferior. Isaak explains, “In this strategy, the conventions and power of language are disrupted by a witticism or a pun, operating like a meta-language athwart the text – annihilating, for an instant, it’s domination by the power of nonsense” (Isaak 15). Explanations that seek to maintain the patriarchal system are destabilized by this humor and witticism because, by interrupting serious language with humorous language, the ridiculousness of certain situations and representations, such as the representations of female leaders, are revealed. Even when it

seems on the surface as if portrayals of women in comedy are reinforcing the views of the existing patriarchal system, the humor that these women use and the laughter that they cause emphasize their greater goal, which is the destabilization of the seriousness of societal expectations for women. Historically, women have been excluded from power and expected to remain docile in their lives. These expectations are illogical, unrealistic, and antiquated and can no longer be expected to be the standard that society sets for women.

For this reason, as representations of the nasty woman, I will analyze the portrayal of two female leaders who are portrayed in two popular comedy television shows: Selina Meyer of *Veep* and Leslie Knope of *Parks and Recreation*. *Parks and Rec* is a comedy show that originally aired on NBC that depicts the lives of various people who work in the Parks and Recreation Department of the city government of Pawnee, Indiana. One of the people who work in the department is Leslie Knope, portrayed by Amy Poehler, who is a diligent public servant who fights to rise through the ranks of public offices in order to genuinely help her town and her country. Although she starts off in a small leadership position, she eventually moves up the leadership ladder from Deputy Director of the Parks and Rec Department, to City Council Woman, to Regional Director of National Park Service Midwest Region, to Deputy Director of Operations at United States Department of Interior, to Governor of Indiana in 2025, and even to President of the United States in 2048. She is determined, kind, and selfless; she acts as an inspiration for those around her. Overall, Leslie has it all: success in her career, a loving husband, and children that she loves. The only thing that she lacks is the respect of her town in her endeavors. Meanwhile, *Veep* is an HBO program that follows the inner workings of

Washington DC, focusing on the antics of the Vice President and those who work for her. In *Veep*, Selina Meyer, played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus, is initially the Vice President and later becomes the President of the United States, who is constantly dealing with and coming up with solutions for drama and mistakes in her office in a way that is beneficial to her, but not necessarily the country as a whole. Overall, she is a determined, yet self-centered, disaster who fights for what will keep her on top of those around her. Despite the fact that Selina and Leslie are very different people, they both contribute to the same idea: society has specific anxieties about seeing women in leadership and these televisions demonstrate those anxieties.

Overall, the portrayals of both Selina and Leslie represent three main anxieties that society has about female leaders: the fear that women are incompetent, uncontrollable, and altogether bad leaders, the fear that women leaders will abandon traditional feminine roles, and the fear that female leaders will castrate the men around them. By portraying these fears in a comedy show, the images of Selina and Leslie, the former who is so horrible and the latter who is so perfect, emphasize both that these anxieties exist and that they cannot be applied to all female leaders. Not only this, but the dichotomy between Selina and Leslie represents the unrealistic expectation of female leaders, where one is bad and one is good, but there is no gray area. Selina embodies everything that society fears about having women in power; she is genuinely a terrible leader. However, she also represents the decision to put her political endeavors over all other aspects of her life, a choice of which society is also afraid. The way that she acts is the way in which society fears all female leaders will act. On the other hand, Leslie's character is a great leader who brings about positive change, but her town within the

show still expects her to be, and treats her as if she is, actually terrible. In this manner, Leslie's continuous positive actions in response to the town's scrutiny and denunciation, as I will explain later in the text, represents the combatting of the negative perceptions in regard to women in leadership positions. However, Leslie's perfectionism sets an unrealistic expectation for female leaders to be completely perfect, which is not a viable expectation for women in society either. By comparing these two women, it can be seen that no matter how a woman actually acts in a position of power, there is still the anxiety-induced expectation that she will fail miserably.



## Chapter One: Female Leaders versus the Fears of the “Axis of Dick”

“This is a man’s world we live in. Because of the axis of dick” (Ianucci); Selina Meyer says these words in the fifth episode of the second season of *Veep*. By using the expression the “axis of dick”, Selina means the historic domination that men have had on positions of leadership. Historically, the word axis has become associated with times of war, such as the axis powers of World War Two and the axis of evil of the Global War on Terror. Selina’s use of the word axis thus references fighting and war: must women wage war against the “axis of dick”? Does combatting the “axis of dick” cause societal anxiety from the male perspective? And if so, are women seen in a negative way for trying to combat the “axis of dick”? In this sense, combatting the “axis of dick” would mean putting more women in leadership positions. The “axis of dick” would be opposed to having women in positions of power because leadership is not a trait that is typically associated with women. In the context of *Veep* and *Parks and Rec*, Selina and Leslie, as nasty women, are in fact seen negatively for placing themselves in a spot regularly reserved for men.

In recent years, as I mentioned in the introduction, there has been an increase in the number of women who hold higher leadership positions in the United States. However, despite this rise, the United States still exists as one of the many countries of the world that has never had a female president. In fact, according to the World Economic forum of 2014 and 2015, the United States is one of the 56 countries, of the 146 analyzed, that has not had a female head of government in the past fifty years (Geiger and Kent). One reason for the lack of female leaders in the United States is the anxiety that women will automatically be bad leaders who do not have what it takes to be

in positions of power. The uncertainties that some people in the United States have toward women leaders were exemplified in the treatment of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election. One study carried out by Jarrod Bock, Jennifer Byrd-Craven, and Melissa Burkley at Oklahoma State University, in which student voters were polled in regard to gender stereotypes in elections, asserts that one factor that contributed to Clinton's loss in the election is the negative views of voters toward female leaders in general (Bock, Byrd-Craven, and Burkley). The study analyzed the student participants by looking at their views about traditional attitudes toward women, as they related to both benevolent sexism, where women are expected and praised to remain in these traditional roles, which do not include political leadership, and hostile sexism, where women are viewed in a negative manner for going against the norms of society. The study showed that Hillary Clinton experienced hostile sexism in the election because voters did not like that she was being too assertive and aggressive, traits that are not associated with women, in her campaign. The stereotype that women are meant to be docile and kind, rather than strong, powerful, and aggressive, makes people believe that women would not be fit to be leaders, and also that women who display these character traits are subverting the natural order of society. Examples of hostile sexism can also be seen when looking at the negative representations of Selina and Leslie on their respective television shows. Although Hillary was originally called nasty woman in 2016, Selina and Leslie had been dealing with the repercussions of the societal attitudes toward the nasty woman since the beginning of their existence within their shows, 2012 for *Veep* and 2009 for *Parks and Rec*. The fact that both of these shows are comedies only emphasizes the ridiculousness of the generic negative views toward nasty women. Selina's disastrous nature and

Leslie's town's illogical hatred of her are laughable. The humor in this portrayal points out the stupidity in assuming that all women will be terrible leaders strictly based on their gender alone.

The use of traditional gender stereotypes to portray bad female leaders in comedy television may seem like a way to further stress the argument that women will be bad leaders because they inherently do not have the correct character traits. However, feminist comedy theorists assert that these portrayals act as an argument against the notion that employing female stereotypes means the further demeaning of women. For example, Sevda Caliskan explains that the portrayal of stereotypes within female comedies acts as a way to subversively undermine the stereotypes that the patriarchy seeks to employ against women. For this reason, Caliskan states that women's humor exists to avoid and combat the danger of degradation of women that exists within male humor. According to Caliskan, "There is no such danger in women's humor, which addresses itself to women and does not ask its readers to identify against their own interests. Even the kind of humor which uses negative stereotypes and thus seems to perpetuate patriarchal assumptions is essentially subversive, subtly undermining the social system that makes such stereotypes possible" (Caliskan 54). The negative stereotypes that make Selina and Leslie, in some ways, bad leaders are portrayed in comedies to exemplify that these stereotypes are ridiculous and unfounded. Portraying Selina in the worst way possible, and the depiction of Pawnee's hatred of Leslie, causes viewers, especially female viewers, to question the absurdity of their situations and start to think about why women are portrayed in this way and why women should not be expected to act in this manner.

### **Selina Meyer: *A Woman First: First Woman*<sup>1</sup>**

As a nasty woman, Selina Meyer is the embodiment of the societal fears of incompetent and altogether bad female leaders. She is selfish, hypocritical, over-emotional, untrustworthy, and corrupt. She messes up every project that she undertakes and causes major scandals throughout the series. With the representation of someone like Selina, it is obvious why people would be afraid to have a female leader; having someone like Selina in office would be terrible for the United States in real life just as having the actual Selina in power on television is terrible for that fictional version of the United States. However, it is important to note that the portrayal of Selina in this manner is constructed by the existence of these fears of nasty women.

Various episodes and storylines of *Veep* demonstrate certain fears that society has about bad female leaders, in which all female leaders will be absolutely powerless to carry out any accomplishments for the country. One of these anxieties that is made clear throughout the series is that Selina is incapable of successfully carrying out most of her endeavors that she seeks to accomplish while Vice President and President. Historically, as I have mentioned, most heads of government around the world have been men, and all presidents and vice presidents in the history of the United States have been men. Because of this consistency of male power, there is the expectation that in order to be successful in high political positions, one has to be male. As a result of this mindset, Selina's spectacular political failures come about to support the assertion of failure of female leaders. However, the absurdity of how badly she fails makes her failures funny, rather

---

<sup>1</sup> This subheading refers to the name of Selina Meyer's memoir in *Veep*.

than upsetting. Viewers are not crying when Selina fails to bring her endeavors to fruition, but rather they are laughing. For example, in the first season of *Veep*, Selina's major legislative efforts go into the Clean Jobs Bill, which Selina wants to be her legacy as Vice President (*Veep Wikia*) The Clean Jobs Bill was a piece of legislation that was meant to put sanctions on polluters and provide tax breaks for those that worked against pollution. Selina does not care about the bill itself, but rather only cares about the legacy that it will provide for her. For Selina, it is all about the image. She wants to appear as if she has done great things and that she is a great leader, even if she has not and is not. Once again, Selina's attitude toward the Bill represents the sexist mindset that women in office are going to be selfish, because they are already viewed as selfish for going against societal expectations. As Selina fights for support of the Clean Jobs Bill and task force, her efforts are constantly stilted by the men around her. Every time she tries to move the lobbying of the bill further, some man tries to stop her because he does not fully agree with every aspect of her bill. Men from the oil companies want one thing, various senators want something else, and the President, yet another man in power, also desires a different outcome for Clean Jobs. In the end, the bill fails to pass because the President decides that there are more pressing bills that need to go through. The fact that her bill fails because she is not able to please every man that is impacted by it is symbolic in itself. As a nasty woman, the men around her would not want her to succeed and therefore they shut her efforts down any chance they can get. Creating real change with the Clean Jobs bill would mean that a nasty woman can have actual impact on the politics of society, so the fact that Selina's bill fails only adds to the idea that society fears that nasty women can, in the words of the nasty woman movement, "get shit done" (Gray).

On a similar note, Selina's advocacy for her Families First, or Meyer, Bill and the ensuing debacle that results when she decides to kill the bill, after a data breach that releases confidential information, marks another fear that society has toward female leaders: the fear of untrustworthiness and corruption. In season four of *Veep*, Selina advocates for the bill to support families in need, but the promotion of the bill causes outrage when Selina unintentionally uses information from an illegal data breach in a speech to promote the bill and unintentionally reveals the identity of a young girl who contracted HIV through breast milk. To make matters even worse, as part of a campaign mailer to promote the Families First Bill called the I Care Program, the campaign team sent out cards to families around the United States. What they did not know was that medical records from the data breach were used to specifically target recently bereaved parents in the campaign. To make up for the initial realization of the data breach Selina had a young worker of little importance named Leigh fired as a scapegoat for the incident. Later, Dan Egan, a senior advisor to Selina, is also scapegoated for the data breach and fired as well. Selina fired these two people as a sacrifice more than anything else. She did not know who caused the data breach and she needed it to make it seem like she had more control over the situation than she actually did. In reality, these events emphasize the lack of control that Selina has over her administration and if this knowledge came out to the world, it would reveal her incompetence. As a woman in office, she is already expected to be incapable of managing the serious amount of power that comes with the job of President, but the information surrounding the data breach would only confirm to people that she should not have the job.

However, later on in season four, specifically in the seventh episode, all of the corruption and incompetence within Selina's office starts to come to light. Resulting from the data breach and an overall dislike for the Families First Bill, Selina decides to kill the bill in order to preserve her status and maintain support for herself in the upcoming election season. In attempting to get Congressmen to vote against the bill, Selina and those who work for her all end up getting wrapped up in a case of fraud as they hire lobbyists, Dan and Amy, who formerly worked for Selina, to lobby against the bill. Because of the link between lobbyists and her office, Selina and her staff must attend an investigative hearing to prove they did not commit fraud by secretly trying to end the bill with lobbyists. Throughout this episode, it is clear that nearly everyone is lying on the stand, but it is most obvious that Selina is lying. She changes her stories to protect herself and places the blame for the scandals around her on anyone else but herself.

According to a poll from the *LA Times*, the words most frequently used by her opponents to describe Hillary Clinton are liar, corrupt, and criminal (Zhang). The portrayal of Selina in *Veep*, especially in the episode that she gives her testimony for the Families First Bill hearing, makes it seem like Selina is just the embodiment of the negative traits associated with women throughout history, which means they have come to be associated with all female leaders. The following are the phrases that people used to criticize Hillary, but they could easily be also talking about Selina: "Hillary Clinton is a liar and will say anything just to get a vote." "She is a very competent and corrupt politician." "She is in it for power and her own gain. She is a liar and criminal. She feels she is above any laws." "In the end she is teaching us that lying to get what you want is ok. And it's not" (Zhang). Hillary Clinton has her own

flaws, but the fact that Selina also has these traits in a fictional television show emphasizes that there is this expectation that female leaders are inherently corrupt and will do things in office that will be detrimental to not only the image of President, but the United States as a whole. However, despite the extensive corruption, the humor that comes from this disaster is hilarious. The lies that Selina tells to cover up the data breach scandal become so numerous that it is ridiculous. Everything that she says contradicts the last thing that she says and she continuously digs herself deeper into a hole of lies. It gets to a point when viewers are no longer thinking about how corrupt she is, but rather of the absurdity that anyone could be this corrupt. The ludicrousness leads to the winning question that subverts societal expectations: why would anyone expect a woman leader to be this spectacularly corrupt?

Another anxiety that comes with women in leadership is the fear of typical so-called bitchiness of women. For example, season five episode six, entitled “Cuntgate”, focuses around the fact that someone working in the White House called Selina a cunt and someone from the news source Politico overheard and published a story about it. Selina delegates Amy, a female leader within the administration, to find out who called Selina such a terrible word. In the end, it is revealed that basically every person who has worked for Selina has referred to her as a cunt at some point. Who called her a cunt is not as important as the sexism behind the use of the word and the importance of acknowledging its use within the presidential administration. According to a review of the episode by Kate Kulzick, “There is no word that, when directed at men, is equivalent to the word cunt, when directed at women” (Kulzick). The use of the word cunt is inherently sexist because there is no word in existence that is as strong when applied to



men. When people see Selina, the first female president, they think of her as such: a female president and not just a president. The use of highly negative and highly gendered terminology to denounce Selina with the show emphasizes the issue that the people around her do not see her as a strong option for a leader because of her status as a woman, or as everyone describes her, as a cunt. The irony of the situation, however, is that Selina is in fact a cunt, as it is used as an insult to a terrible and bitchy woman. As a viewer watching the show, it is apparent why Selina is called a cunt, and even Selina just accepts that insult at the end of the episode when she finds out that everyone used that word to describe her. Her resignation of being called a cunt is funny, but it also brings up two concepts that exist within the patriarchy to be questioned: why is this word expected to be used toward female leaders and why should it not be used?

With the notion of bad female leaders, there is also the fear among the female population in the United States that a female president or any high up female leader would not represent the interests of all women while they are in office. Selina also personifies this anxiety through her portrayal as an anti-feminist who generally does not like other women. Despite being a powerful female figure, Selina does very little to help other women rise up to be powerful with her. According to a study carried out by the Women's Campaign Forum Foundation, "in order to mitigate the damage [of sexism] and regain lost ground, female candidates must respond swiftly and strongly to such attacks by identifying them as inappropriate and damaging to all women" (Lowen). Selina does not do much in term of acknowledging the extent to which sexism can harm other women and she is even guilty of making blatantly sexist comments herself. She has been described as a "hypocritical self-proclaimed feminist", a description that sums up the fact

that she uses feminism when it is beneficial to her own image, but does not use it to support other women (Flynn). The hypocrisy stems from her sexist remarks toward other women. For example, after Selina loses the election to become president at the beginning of the sixth season of *Veep*, she makes it her new goal to create a presidential library. When discussing who would be hired as the architect to build the library, one of her staffers suggests hiring a female architect to which Selina responds, "'We're not redoing a kitchen here!'" (Ianucci). Referencing the sexist stereotype that a woman should only do work that takes place in the home, Selina is completely undermining the abilities of women to work in whatever field that they desire.

Furthermore, when discussing the idea of having the library built at Smith College, the all-women's college where Selina received her undergraduate degree, the president of the college points out that the library would be perfect for the new School of Public Policy and Women's Studies. Selina is less than enthused about her library being connected with women's studies and suggests, "It's a bit of a word salad. Maybe trim that last part about women?" (Ianucci). Selina makes it clear that she does not want her legacy to be associated with women, but rather strictly with public policy, a more gender-neutral field of study. Selina's refusal to be associated with other women marks an extremely problematic aspect of her character, which contributes to the fact that as a woman in a leadership position, she stands for the fears that both men and women have about women in positions of power in the United States. Despite the sexism that Selina portrays, her actions still provide a feminist message. Selina is like a chameleon, she changes her stance on women depending on who she is with. If she is with young feminist, she acts like the most powerful feminist of all, but if she is alone with her staff she makes it clear

that she does not care about women. The contrast between these two personalities is silly, but, like every other negative aspect of Selina, it makes a point to subversively criticize the patriarchy's expectation that women will do anything to keep a positive image of themselves, even if it means denouncing their own gender. As a woman within the show, Selina oftentimes denounces her gender, but female viewers watching the show do not denounce Selina.

### **Leslie Knope: The Leader Pawnee Doesn't Know It Needs**

On the other hand, the portrayal of Leslie Knope stands in direct contrast to Selina, but society still fears her, at least within the realm of *Parks and Rec*. In every leadership position that Leslie holds throughout the show, she is dedicated and passionate about doing what is best for her town. She is fervent, highly competent, determined, and knowledgeable about all of the issues that impact her town of Pawnee, Indiana. However, her town still has fears about her leadership and denounces her multiple times. Leslie acts as an example of a nasty woman who has the power to make positive change in her community, but still has to deal with societal anxieties about having a bad leader in office because there is the belief that women just cannot be competent leaders.

Leslie causes anxiety about her leadership within Pawnee because she makes decisions as City Councilwoman that are beneficial for the town as a whole, but the ignorant population of Pawnee still sees her as a villain because they do not like change. A female leader is one thing, which is already seen as detrimental, but a female leader who wants to change everything is another story. The townsfolk see her as a tyrant who is taking away aspects of their town that they do not want to change. According to Herminia

Ibarra in her article “Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers”, “It’s not enough to identify and instill the ‘right’ skills and competencies as if in a social vacuum. The context must support a woman’s motivation to lead and also increase the likelihood that others will recognize and encourage her efforts—even when she doesn’t look or behave like the current generation of senior executives” (Ibarra). No matter how strong of a leader Leslie is, if her town does not accept her as a female leader, and if they consistently cannot overlook their gender bias toward her, then it will make it very difficult for her to implement real reform. Yet, Leslie still is able to create positive change without the support of her town. Some of Leslie’s reforms in the town include initiating a sex education program for the elderly population of Pawnee to prevent the further spread of a sexually transmitted disease outbreak, adding a soda tax to companies in the town in order to fight obesity, and increasing the number of female workers in the sanitation department of Pawnee to promote gender equality within government.

The sexual education program for the elderly in season five episode four is a strong example of one of Leslie’s initiatives for Pawnee that causes her to be irrationally rejected by members of the town, in this case because they see her as immoral. In Pawnee, there is an abstinence-only policy for any sex education carried out within the city. Leslie, however, wants to implement extensive sex education, teaching condom use and other ways to prevent STDs, after there is an outbreak of chlamydia within the elderly population of Pawnee. When Leslie tries to establish this program, a conservative couple, Marcia and Marshall Langman, who Leslie calls the town’s “morality watch dogs” come and shut the program down because of its immoral implication that sex outside of marriage is okay (Daniels and Schur). The Langmans are very strict about no

sexual relations before marriage and it is implied that they are also conservative about traditional marriage roles, meaning marriage is between a man and a woman. The irony of the Langmans, especially Marshall, is that the show strongly implies that Marshall is not-so-secretly gay, an aspect of his character of which Marcia is oblivious. Marshall's argument against sex is the strongest implication that he is gay and trying to prevent himself from acting on it: "We all have some crazy urges from time to time, but you just can't act on them. You have to bury them way down deep inside" (Daniels and Schur).

The Langmans, and the ironic comedy centered on Marshall, therefore represent the hypocrisy of the people who oppose Leslie. They want her to be more traditionally moral; meanwhile, Marshall is hiding his true, and in his eyes untraditional and immoral, self by being married to a woman. Despite the protests of the Langmans, Leslie refuses to apologize for her actions because she is only trying to make her town a better place for its citizens and only apologizes for "the antiquated laws of the city" (Daniels and Schur). As a result, the Pawnee Sun, a local newspaper, calls Leslie "Loosely Grope" to insult her over her alleged immorality. The fact that the town resorts to silly name-calling to undermine Leslie's positive influence on the town only emphasizes that they do not have a logical explanation for why they are opposed to her. The entire town is not pro-abstinence, like the Langmans, but the entire history of the United States has promoted the mindset that female leaders are bad, which causes the town of Pawnee to see Leslie as an unfit leader. The humor of this show stems from the fact that viewers can clearly see that Leslie is doing the right thing, but the townsfolk within the show are obstinately sticking with societal expectations to an absurd degree. Despite the opposition, Leslie is

still able to help the elderly population of Pawnee and prevent them from further spreading sexually transmitted diseases.

Furthermore, the addition of female workers to sanitation is especially important because it demonstrates that, unlike Selina, Leslie seeks to help all women, not just herself. At the Equal Gender Employment Commission for the Pawnee government, a commission which ironically features no women representatives besides from Leslie's Parks and Rec Department, Leslie brings attention to the fact that the Pawnee Sanitation Department only has one woman in their entire department and she is a secretary, a traditionally female role. The men in sanitation believe that women cannot handle the workload of working in sanitation, so Leslie and April, a coworker of Leslie's in the Parks and Recreation Department, volunteer to be sanitation workers for a day to prove them wrong. As Leslie and April start their day of collecting garbage Leslie declares, "We have some stereotypes to overcome" (Daniels and Schur). Leslie's feminism is so blatantly obvious that it can never be said that she is not trying to fight for the feminist agenda. When Leslie and April succeed in their day as garbage women, even though the men in the department try to stop them, it marks a feminist victory for Leslie, especially because it results in the hiring of three women in the Sanitation Department. Somehow, even though she brings such great change to her town, she is hated by even the people that she helps.

All of these reforms impact the town in a positive manner, yet the town still resents her for them. In fact, they resent her so much that in the last episode of the fifth season of *Parks and Rec*, they seek to recall her from office. After a year in office, Leslie holds a meeting to discuss "Are You Better Off?", meaning is the town better off after a

year of having Leslie in office as City Councilwoman. It is evident given the progress she has accomplished that the town is in fact better with Leslie Knope in a position of power, but the townsfolk disagree with this fact; they think she is ruining the town, even though she puts all of her efforts into making it better. The resentment toward Leslie results in Kathryn Pinewood, a woman who was opposed to Leslie's soda tax, to act as the driving force to start the recall election for Leslie. She announces the recall process by creating a float in the Pawnee Founders Day Parade that portrays Leslie as a big, angry woman who repeats "No fun for you!" (Daniels and Schur). No matter how many positive changes Leslie has made in Pawnee, the people of the town still see her as an evil dictator. In response to the recall vote, Leslie has only one response: she works very hard to improve the town of Pawnee, and it does not matter if they support her or not because she knows that she has made the town better in her time in office. Even though she is eventually recalled, she never stops trying to make the town better, whether its citizens hate her or not. The process of the recall emphasizes how Leslie is such a good example of a female leader, and a good nasty woman, yet negative traits are still associated with her, which is something that is an issue with many female leaders today.

In relation to the language of dictators, as applied to Leslie, various times throughout the series fellow Councilman Jeremy Jamm, a man who is portrayed as actually idiotic and incompetent, compares Leslie to Adolf Hitler. For one example, Jamm petitions to put Leslie's name on the recall ballot as Leslie Hitler Buttface the Fourth. Later in the series, Leslie discusses a plan that she had with Jamm, a plan which he did not follow. Jamm's response to Leslie's plan is "Your plan? You know who else had a plan? Adolf Hitler!" (Daniels and Schur). The comedic response to these insults is

obvious; it is ridiculous to compare Leslie, a dedicated City Councilwoman, to Hitler, a dictator who killed millions of people. However, the underlying message is still the same, Jamm sees Leslie as evil, as a threat, as someone who should not be in office. In reality, Jamm should not be allowed to be on City Council, but his role is never questioned, except by Leslie, because he is a male in a traditionally male leadership position. Once again, Leslie is denounced by those who are not qualified to denounce her.

However, despite being rejected by her own town, the first episode of the sixth season of *Parks and Rec*, one episode after the town decides to begin the recall process, Leslie goes to London and experiences what it really means to have a female leader accepted, rather than feared and rejected, by the town she leads. April, a younger employee of the Parks and Recreation department, nominates Leslie for an award that is given to five female leaders around the world as part of The International Coalition of Women in Government. Leslie wins the award and goes to London to accept it. At the awards ceremony for the event, Leslie meets Ulee Danssen, portrayed by Heidi Klum, a fellow honoree and female leader from Silkeborg, Denmark. As Ulee discusses her town, she uses words of mutual respect: “It’s not one of the most perfect places in the world, but I love it, and it loves me” (Daniels and Schur). Her town truly loves her and respects her; they even made a statue of goat cheese of her in her honor. Meanwhile, Leslie’s town of Pawnee sums up its feelings toward her by putting her name in a crossword puzzle in the Pawnee Sun with the clue, “She’s the worst” (Daniels and Schur). It is not a coincidence that Leslie is from the United States, where there have been no female presidents, and Ulee is from Denmark, who recently had its first female prime minister, Helle Thorning-Schmidt (Wallenfeldt). The comparison between Leslie and Ulee marks a comparison



between the view toward leaders in the United States and Denmark. According to Uri Friedman in his article “Why It’s So Hard for a Woman to Become President of the United States”, the Pew Research Center found that female leaders are more common in the Nordic countries of Europe, meaning Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Meanwhile, Friedman explains:

The United States, however, lags far behind many countries in closing the politics gap—and not just with regard to the presidency. When it comes to the percentage of female lawmakers in the lower or single house of a national legislature, the United States ranks 99th out of 193 countries, between Kenya and Kyrgyzstan, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Women make up roughly 20 percent of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, and 12 percent of U.S. governors (Friedman).

He goes on to say that a reason behind the lack of female leaders in positions of power in the United States is based on the expectation that women are not capable and cannot be trusted to handle those powerful positions. Friedman continues his discussion with the following assertion: “The more a leadership position is perceived by the public as powerful, the harder it is for women to secure it” (Friedman). Although Leslie initially holds a small leadership position within her town, Pawnee’s attitude toward her still represents the attitude of the United States as a whole toward female leaders. This representation is especially true because Leslie’s position in government may seem small in comparison to something like President, but within the town of Pawnee, the City Council makes most of the decisions so it is viewed as a more powerful position within the microcosm of the town. The fact that Silkeborg’s treatment of Ulee is so much better than Pawnee’s treatment of Leslie demonstrates that there is a much more ideal way to

view women in positions of power than the way in which the United States currently views female leaders.

For the reception, Leslie has a thank you speech prepared in which she plans to make inspirational statements about female leaders and her town. Her original plan is to announce her dreams for society: “So I long for a day when women in government will simply be seen as people in government, but until then I will work to make Pawnee, my wonderful hometown, as good as it can be” (Daniels and Schur). This highly feminist statement emphasizes that Leslie knows that she, along with many other women, are treated differently in their leadership positions because of their gender. She very tactfully presents her argument that a woman’s gender should not impact how people view her ability to lead, implying that this is in fact what happens in Pawnee. However, despite her plans to calmly give her speech, when it comes time to actually say the speech, after seeing how Silkeborg treats Ulee, Leslie expresses her angered feelings about the treatment she receives from her own town of Pawnee. She states:

First let me say, it is a true honor to be here among these amazing women. You all inspire me with your accomplishments and the things you have done for your hometowns and the things your hometowns have done for you. I mean, they're just truly—You know, I've been a public servant for a long time. And you know how I spend my days? Cleaning slime out of rivers and removing slugs from people's front yards. And I love my town, but you know how they repay me? By hating me. They hate me. They want to recall me...I love Pawnee, but sometimes it sucks. The people can be very mean and ungrateful, and they cling to their fried dough and their big sodas, and then they get mad at me when their pants don't fit. You know, I'm sick of it. Pawnee is filled with a bunch of pee-pee-heads (Daniels and Schur).

Leslie, albeit possibly unintentionally because she is not aware until after the speech is over that it was live streamed to Pawnee, uses this speech as a platform to protest the negative views toward women in positions of power, especially as applied to herself. She is sick of the hatred that she experiences as a woman in office. She is sick of her positive work for the town being portrayed as having negative repercussions. Although the language toward the end of the speech, especially the use of the insult “pee-pee-heads” is comical, the systemic oppression of women that she is protesting is not comical at all.

As a whole, both the negative views toward Selina, a terrible example of a woman in a leadership position, and the negative views toward Leslie, a wonderful example, emphasize the fact that there is the expectation that nasty women will fail or that they inherently are bad enough as women that there is no way for them to possibly be beneficial to the public. This inherent sexism in the United States toward female leaders prevents the United States from truly accepting a woman in a position in power, rather than either just barely tolerating her or actively seeking to kick her out of office. The comedy used in these shows, however, emphasizes that these views are problematic and oppressive and need to be changed to create a better society that includes all women in all aspects of life.

## Chapter Two: The Fear of Abandonment of Traditional Gender Roles

Historically, a woman's place has existed within the home; she is a mother, homemaker, and wife. The role of leader does not fit within this sphere. Society therefore fears that nasty women, or female leaders, will abandon all traditional female roles in order to lead society. This notion can also be seen in the representations of Selina and Leslie, where Selina is a terrible mother and wife, or rather divorced wife, and Leslie is still accused of being a terrible mother and wife even though she is a great one. Once again, Selina is the actual representation of society's worst anxieties while Leslie experiences the repercussions of these anxieties on women because society expects every woman to act in the same way as Selina, abandoning her motherly and wifely duties and basically following whatever path she chooses: a terrifying idea in the eyes of traditional society. It is an absurd and hilarious notion that Selina has the potential to be represented as the norm of female leaders, because this is what society fears the most. Selina is such a mess in all areas of her life that it is obvious that no one can possibly be that bad, yet there is still the expectation that women will in fact be that bad. However, there is also another aspect of Selina's character that in some ways makes her a better, more realistic option in society. Selina is the representation of a woman who chooses not to be a mother; she puts her political interests over every other aspect of her life because this is her passion, not motherhood. Looking at Selina in this manner makes Leslie the unrealistic expectation for women; Leslie perfectly balances her life with her husband and triplets, while still managing to constantly focus on her political endeavors. She does it all, but this is not realistic. Leslie does not show the challenge that it takes to be a

mother in politics. Yes, it is great that she does it successfully, but this is not an aspiration for all women, and Selina emphasizes that.

The truth today is that women are not destined to be perfect mothers or even mothers at all. Some women choose to be or end up becoming mothers, while some do not, and it is a woman's choice to make that decision for herself. Pat Gowen, author of a short article on the choice of motherhood, goes even farther with her discussion of the expectations of mothers in relation to feminist ideology, "Not only should womyn have a REAL choice about whether to mother, but we must also recognize and announce to the world that most womyn are not necessarily suited to be mothers. We would never assume that everyone can or should be a farmer to engineer or dancer, but we still cling to the notion that raising up human life is a job that any woman can do effectively" (Gowen 24). Although Gowen argues that women should not be expected to be good mothers, I argue that women should not be expected to want to be mothers at all. A woman's choice of whether or not to be a mother definitely should not impact how she is viewed as a leader in society. Gowen emphatically states that women have been historically restricted because of their biological ability to produce children, but that biological ability does not equate to neither the automatic ability nor the desire to be a mother and only a mother. Yet, there is still the strong expectation that women are supposed to be mothers and remain inside the home. There have also been studies that seek to analyze the reasoning behind the negative views toward working women who decide that they will not be mothers or that they will both be a mother and work, as many women do today. Catherine Verniers and Jorge Vala conducted a study in which they analyzed the data from the Family and Changing Gender Roles module of the International Social Survey

Programme from a variety of countries. The data, which came from Austria, Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Norway, Philippines, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the USA, analyzed whether or not motherhood myths impact sexism and negative views toward women who decided to work after giving birth to a child. By motherhood myths, they mean:

The assumptions that women, by their very nature, are endowed with parenting abilities, that at-home mothers are bonded to their children, providing them unrivalled nurturing surroundings. Conversely, motherhood myths pathologised alternative mothering models, depicting employed mothers as neglecting their duty of caring, threatening the family relationships and jeopardizing mother-children bondings (Verniers and Vala).

Verniers and Vala come to the conclusion that “Motherhood myths are a widespread justification for gender discrimination in the workplace” (Verniers and Vala). Their data supports the idea that people within these countries believe that a woman’s decision to work after having children negatively impacts those children and the traditional family structure as a whole. Nasty women are expected to go against the motherhood myths because of the fact that they choose to hold positions of leadership instead of focusing strictly on raising children. This decision supposedly means that they are neglecting the role that they are naturally meant to do. Selina actually does abandon most motherly duties regarding her daughter Catherine, whereas Leslie’s town assumes that she abandons her motherly role to her triplets, even though she does not. Altogether, these nasty women are viewed negatively for their decision to pursue a political leadership position instead of staying at home and only being mothers. If women do not act as mothers and homemakers, something they are supposedly naturally meant to do, then

who will do it? While this question is left unanswered, society becomes horrified at the fact that women would simply abandon these positions.

In Kathleen Rowe Karlyn's work on unruly women, she delineates the various definitions of "mother" and "motherhood", asserting that these are divided based on the patriarchal institution of motherhood and a woman's own personal relations to motherhood. She explains the digression between these two distinct definitions:

One route of this impasse draws on Rich's distinction between motherhood as an institution and, shaped by the interests of patriarchy, and motherhood as any woman's potential relation to her own reproductive powers and to children under her care. Both pave the way toward understanding that motherhood, like any other identity category, derives not from an 'essential' biological condition or relationship but from a set of historically specific conditions. Women who identify unquestioningly with the institution of motherhood become patriarchy's cops, raising daughters who support the status quo not only by becoming 'good girls' but also by internalizing patriarchy's matrophobia (Karlyn 20).

Neither Selina nor Leslie is the "patriarchy's cops": Selina because she does not care about being a mother or how she treats her daughter at all and Leslie because she teaches her children not to follow patriarchal rules. By being a female leader in a town of male leaders, Leslie teaches her children to go against the status quo and not listen to societal anxieties that tell them to exist in a certain way. On the other hand, Selina does not fall into either of these categories because she blatantly falls into the category of a bad mother. However, the bad mother really is not necessarily a bad mother at all, but rather just a woman who chooses not to be a mother, or not to go along with patriarchal expectations of motherhood as the automatic path for women. Karlyn also touches upon the idea of the bad mother and what her existence causes in society. She states "Bad

mothers loom large in the imagination of men, who fear their power to punish them (Karlyn 13). Motherhood gives women a power that men can never obtain and a bad mother can use that power to punish the men who have oppressed her under the patriarchy. This topic regarding men's fear of castration resulting from women taking on leadership positions will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Karlyn also emphasizes that bad mothers are represented as “monstrous, incompetent, or just not there” (Karlyn 12). Selina comes across as all three of these qualities, while Leslie is associated with these qualities even though she does not actually exhibit them, as I will exemplify later in the chapter. Mothers like Selina neglect their children, treat them cruelly, and generally act toward them in a way that makes it clear that children are not the top priority in the mother's life. In comparison, so-called good mothers cause no conflict in society because they are often not represented in popular culture or hold such a simple role that they cannot possibly cause any change. They work within the status quo as cops of the patriarchy, as Karlyn describes, and maintain the traditional gender roles of women as the good housewife and mother. As I have already discussed, Selina and Leslie are not this type of good mother. Even if they are both technically portrayed as bad mothers in the most humorous of ways, they should not be denounced for not being seen as good mothers. They both represent that women in society have choices, and these choices give them the opportunity to define motherhood in their own way. Together, these two nasty women scare society by going against the traditional expectations of women by being leaders, and treating motherhood in a different way than that which traditional gender roles demands, whether that means being



a bad mother like Selina or being a mother that balances work with her life with children, like Leslie.

### **Bad Mother, Good Feminist?**

Selina is an all-around terrible mother to her daughter Catherine. It is funny to see how bad of a mother she truly is. In fact, she prefers not to refer to herself as a mother at all. When discussing the important roles that she has played in her life, after losing the presidential election, Selina lists, “I was a two term Senator, I was a Congresswoman, I was the first woman Vice President, and America cannot forget that.” While listing these positions, Gary, her personal assistant, interjects that she is also a mother, to which she responds with an emphatic “No!” (Ianucci). Selina does not consider motherhood to be an important part of her identity. She refuses to be defined as a mother and does not let her daughter get in the way of the advancement of her career. Later on in the same episode, when Selina and her Chief of Staff Amy discuss Catherine’s father and Selina’s cheating ex-husband Andrew, Amy describes Andrew as similar to the herpes virus or an unwanted child because he is hard to get rid of, to which Selina responds “In this case, he gave me both” (Ianucci). This comment is so off-handed that it is funny; Selina does not even have to think, she just casually says that she never really wanted Catherine or a child at all. Symbolically, Selina’s disregard for motherhood and her own daughter can be represented when a young Catherine was literally pushed out of the way, and off a stage, twice, at one of Selina’s campaign rallies in 1998 (Ianucci). Throughout the entire series, this trend continues as Catherine is pushed out of rooms and meetings when she is interrupting Selina’s political endeavors.

From the very first episode in which Catherine is introduced, in the third episode of season one, it is clear that Selina is a bad mother. She even says so herself, “I feel like a bad mom, you know? Because I never let Catherine have a dog when she was little. So this is a fresh start for us; its parental ground zero” (Ianucci) The fact that Selina thinks that the only reason that she has been a bad mother is because she did not get Catherine a dog only emphasizes Selina’s incompetence as a mother. Additionally, Selina’s plan of “parental ground zero” in this episode is clearly not an actual fresh start because this is only the first episode in which the spectator sees the bad treatment of Catherine, and this bad treatment continues throughout the rest of the series. The constant harsh treatment and disregard toward Catherine is hammered into the viewer; bad mother becomes a personality trait of Selina in a way that is inherent in her character.

The disregard for motherhood is evident upon a deeper examination of the emotional relationship between Selina and Catherine. From the very beginning, Catherine appears to be more of annoying nuisance to Selina than anything else. Catherine shows little affection and a lack of understanding toward her mother and more so just seems uncomfortable to be around her. The same can be said about Selina’s feelings toward Catherine. Selina consistently shows her lack of maternal feelings when it comes to Catherine. She complains about spending time with her, mocks her collegiate documentary, forces her to break up with her boyfriends when it suits her campaigns, and uses Catherine to get out of uncomfortable interactions. Selina even goes as far as to out Catherine’s lesbian relationship, because it was beneficial for Selina’s political career, despite Catherine explicitly saying that she wanted to keep it out of politics.

Overall, Selina only uses her role as a mother to advance her political career. It is evident that any scene in the show that includes Catherine also includes Selina doing something selfish in a way that hurts Catherine. Selina only treats Catherine nicely when she is trying to develop her political image. Also, her selfishness, according to critics of working mothers, is demonstrated based on the fact that she chose to pursue a political career in the first place, even after she learned she was pregnant with Catherine. Although there are many examples of selfishness in Selina's treatment of Catherine, the most prominent example of this self-interest is Selina's reactions to Catherine's decision to have a baby with her partner Marjorie, using Richard, an African American man who is Selina's Chief of Staff at the time, as the sperm donor. If Selina does not like the idea of being a mother, she really does not like the idea of becoming a grandmother. However, she does like the good publicity that comes from a grandson with an African American father and her "lesbian daughter's Native American lesbian life partner" (Ianucci). Because of this, Selina takes it upon herself to introduce the baby to the media along with telling them that his name is Richard, despite Catherine and Marjorie never agreeing to that name. The use of her grandchild as a political tool brings up the notion that all women who work with children are selfish, not only in Selina's case in which she uses everything for her own personal gain, but the general idea that women who work are putting themselves over the needs of their families. However, the description of Selina as selfish calls into question the idea that women who choose not to be mothers are terrible people because patriarchal rules implicate that women must be mothers. Even though Selina has Catherine, she still really is not a mother in the patriarchal sense of the word,

but this decision to define herself as a politician rather than a mother is a choice that Selina has a right to make.

The sentiments of society that women who work while also having children are selfish are exemplified in Lydia Lovric's "Dear Daughter, Here's Why I Don't Work" which is in response to an article written by Editor-in-Chief of *Today's Parent* Sasha Emmons entitled "Dear Daughter, Here's Why I Work." Emmons lists the reasons why she works while being a mother, which include the love for her job, the need for a two-income household to support the family, and the desire to fight the idea that women are supposed to stay home while the men in the family go out and work. She ends her list with a feminist message: "I work because even at your young age you've absorbed the subtle message that women's work is less important and valuable—and that the moms who really love their kids don't do it. I work because by the time you have your own daughter, I cross my fingers this will not be so" (Emmons). Emmons, however, emphasizes that she still loves her children more than anything else and she should not be criticized for working to support herself and her family. Meanwhile, two years later, Lovric basically attacks her in a response to her article, claiming that Emmons is being selfish for working after having children. She asserts that by wanting to make money and work at the job that she loves, Emmons is a bad, self-centered, failure of a mother who does not care about her children or their happiness. In Lovric's own view, "The feminists may not like it, dear daughter, but... I would feel like an utter failure if any of my kids felt the need to ask me if I loved work more than I loved them" (Lovric). Lovric is more than willing to spread her opinion that she believes that this should be true for all mothers. She would certainly apply it to Selina. This expectation for women to remain

home, and the denunciation of women who choose to work, only restricts women from pursuing any life path other than motherhood and marriage. However, there also exists another option in society for women and that is women who choose to love their job more than their own kids or who choose to love their job instead of having kids at all. This love is what Selina experiences. She is represented as such a horrible mother because this is what society expects of women who leave their children to pursue a career. In this sense, although she is a bad mother, Selina becomes a feminist icon in regard to motherhood. She is a whole-hearted supporter of a woman's decision to choose to be a mother in the life of her child. For this, the patriarchy denounces her as selfish. Thus, Selina's so-called selfish decision to become a political leader, and therefore "abandoning" her daughter, not only acts as a manifestation of society's fears that having a working mother will severely damage a child, but it also becomes a feminist outcry against societal expectations of motherhood.

In addition, having Catherine in her life adds more uncertainty to Selina's political career because the media constantly scrutinizes Catherine's actions and relates them to Selina's views on politics. For example, Selina has to deal with the repercussions when Catherine writes a college essay about a film called *Five Broken Cameras* which depicts Palestinian non-violent resistance to Israeli resettlement of the West Bank. In her essay, which goes public on media outlets, Catherine "talks about the masterly portrayal of brutal, illegal Israeli aggression" (Ianucci). Catherine's essay goes against the unofficial policy of the administration to not discuss the Middle East and family strife, especially because Catherine's essay favors and sympathizes with Palestinian families. After the media hears about the essay, both Catherine and Selina are criticized for being

either pro-Palestine or anti-Israel and the administration has to come up with a way to fix it in order to make them tactically appear neutral, while still showing support for the country of Israel. However, Catherine refuses to apologize for her essay which causes Selina to be scrutinized for her own views on the Middle East. As a result, Selina jokes that she is going to “daughterboard” Catherine, referencing the torture method of waterboarding. Although it is clearly a joke, the anger that Selina shows towards Catherine emphasizes how much of a negative impact that Catherine can have on Selina’s position as Vice President. Catherine’s inability to understand that her actions impact her mother’s career exemplifies that Catherine’s very existence causes difficulties in Selina’s life as a female leader and mother, the latter of which is a title that she makes clear is not something she wants to be associated with.

With her distant relationship with Catherine, Selina emphasizes her desire to put her political career before all other things. Selina’s cruel and uncaring relationship with Catherine demonstrates that she does not allow the fact that she is a mother to deter her from advancing her political career to the best of her ability, and society fears her because of it. However, even with the cruel treatment of Catherine, Selina’s role as a mother is still funny; it still causes laughter. Eventually, the spectator just expects Selina to do terrible things to Catherine because it has been a recurring incident throughout the show to see how horrible she is. Despite the negative treatment, the spectator does not feel that bad for Catherine because she is represented as an annoying nuisance to Selina who negatively impacts her political career by existing. The laughter that Selina’s bad mothering causes the spectator to think about the institution of motherhood and the idea that women are destined to be mothers. Selina clearly does not want to be a mother, given

that she is both monstrous and completely uncaring. The horribleness that is Selina makes the spectator think that maybe women are not in fact destined to be mothers; not all women have to be loving mothers, but rather they can choose to love their career instead.

### **Good Mother, Impossible Standards**

Although Leslie's role as a mother and wife are not criticized much on *Parks and Rec*, because she is an amazing mother and wife despite holding various leadership positions, there are still some instances in which she is criticized for the assumption that she is a bad mother and wife. Leslie is not just a mother, but the mother of triplets. She is shown to struggle initially with the idea of balancing her kids and her career, but in actuality she still thrives in both categories and is never shown to falter in her career even when she is raising her kids. This is an unrealistic expectation for women in society. Not everyone can be Leslie Knope. Not everyone can have triplets and still never waver in their career. The perfect balance that Leslie has is almost impossible to achieve. However, just looking at Pawnee's perception of Leslie, even though she is a great mother to her children and a great wife to her husband, she still is criticized by the media over her status as a wife, mother, and public leader. The inability to keep her town happy underscores the fact that someone will always criticize a woman for deciding to pursue endeavors outside of motherhood and marriage. Yes, Leslie is a wife and mother, but her defining role is that of a town leader.

As a main plot point of the last season of *Parks and Rec*, Leslie's husband Ben Wyatt is running for Congress. For this reason, Leslie must play the role of the candidate's wife, rather than the candidate which she is more accustomed to. This role

includes participating in the Pie-mary, a pie-baking contest among all the wives of the candidates who are running for Congress. Because she does not have time with so many other events, she decides to skip this tradition. Leslie expresses her feelings about the Pie-mary, which she views as sexist and demeaning to women for representing such stereotypically traditional values, in the following way: “The last contest's winner was June Hartwell's buttermilk meringue. Last contest's loser was all women” (Daniels and Schur). Leslie makes it clear that she thinks that having a bake-off is not the most worthwhile thing that the candidate’s wife should be doing, especially since she is used to being viewed as a town leader, and not just a wife.

Leslie’s decision to forego the Pie-mary causes many people to critique her for not valuing traditional female roles, such as home-making, motherhood, and cooking. Mike Patterson, a reporter from Pawnee, throws this accusation at Leslie while she is holding a press conference: “Leslie you made it pretty clear that you don’t consider homemaking as important. Do you ever cook for your children and who’s even watching your children right now while you’re out God only knows where” (Daniels and Schur). The reporter, along with many other people in the town, completely misconstrues Leslie’s decision and makes it seem like she is declaring her hatred for so-called traditional female values. In reality, her decision to skip the Pie-mary represents not a hatred of these values, but rather a denunciation of the expectations that women must adhere to these values. The ridiculousness of it all is emphasized by Patterson’s claim that she is out “God only knows where” when she is in fact standing right in front of him at a political press conference. Later on in an interview, Mike Patterson discusses the implications of Leslie’s abstention from the Pie-mary with June Hartwell, a conservative



woman and the wife of the congressman that Ben is running to replace. Patterson starts the conversation by saying, “we all know what Ben Wyatt’s wife is really saying. By skipping the Pie-mary, she saying women who love their families are stupid. June responds, “Well, Mike, we all make certain choices. Ms. Knope chose to try to have it all. I chose to put my family first.” Again, Mike responds, “I’m just speculating here but do you think Leslie Knope’s actions indicate that she actually hates her family?” (Daniels and Schur). It is very clear that, to an absurd degree, Mike and June strongly believe in the motherhood myth. They represent the people in society that really do think that a woman has to choose leadership over traditional roles; they cannot do both. In reality, the inherent issue in this situation is that there is the expectation that women must be mothers and wives in the first place. The fact that society believes that women who do become leaders cannot possibly be good wives and mothers is just an additional irrational fear about female leaders.

After receiving extensive criticisms, Leslie changes her mind and decides to participate in the Pie-mary in order to not detract from her husband’s campaign. She again is criticized for this decision, this time by every possible group in town: the conservative Langmans, the Indiana Organization of Women (IOW), Women Against Feminism (WAF), and the Male Men, a male rights group. The Langmans think Leslie is attacking traditional family values, the IOW thinks she is not distancing herself enough from family values, the WAF does not want women to make any decisions at all, and the Male Men think Leslie is oppressing Ben just because she is an independent woman who makes her own decisions. Leslie only wants to express the fact that a candidate’s wife like herself, who is a strong, independent female leader, does not have to act like the

typical candidate's wife that society is accustomed to. As a result, she is attacked from all sides. Society fears what it cannot control and none of these groups of people can control how Leslie Knope acts. Deviation from the status quo marks her as a bad wife, a bad mother, and a bad woman in general.

Eventually, Leslie and Ben decide that Ben is going to participate in the Pie-mary and bake a dessert calzone, but somehow Leslie is still criticized from this decision. As a result of the criticism, Ben not only supports Leslie as she defends herself, but also makes a speech in defense of her, asserting, "Leslie is a great mother, public servant, and all around person and I am tired of everybody constantly telling her that she is making the wrong choice...no one ever asks me 'where are your kids'...so maybe Leslie doesn't fit your personal idea of whatever it is a candidate's wife should be. So what? That's good because there shouldn't be just one idea anyway" (Daniels and Schur). Ben points out the double-standard held against women, in which they are always asked about the children and home whereas men are never asked these questions. He is not expected to be a bad father and bad husband, just because he is running for Congress, and Leslie should not be thought of as a bad mother and bad wife just because she is a female leader who does not believe that a candidate's wife should only dedicate her time to being a wife and mother.

The importance that society places on the connection between women and motherhood and women and marriage detracts from a woman's status as a leader. Leslie also speaks to the crowd in a way that emphasizes that society should not denounce and fear her just because she is not the traditional woman. She asserts, "If you wanna bake a pie, that's great. If you wanna have a career, that's great, too. Do both, or neither, it doesn't matter. Just don't judge what someone else has decided to do. We're all just trying

to find the right path for us” (Daniels and Schur). Although this may be a strong oversimplification of women’s choices, as the portrayal of Leslie’s decision to “do both” is highly unrealistic, the mindset behind her assertion is still a feminist one. She firmly stresses that women have various options in what they can do in life, just like men have options, and that women cannot be feared just because they choose a path that society does not agree with. Just because women do not act as the patriarchal cops of society, does not mean that they are going to destroy society. With the acknowledgment of the unfair expectations of women in politics, Leslie and Ben both denounce the societal belief that women leaders will be bad mothers and bad wives. Historically, women have been held to certain standards and expectation by society and Leslie makes it clear that this can no longer continue.

Both the representations of Selina and Leslie are influenced by and add to the idea in society that it is difficult to be a mother, wife, and political leader without giving up one of those roles. However, they also emphasize society’s fear that women will choose leadership over the other roles that they are traditionally supposed to play. This underlying fear causes men to cringe at the bad mothering of Selina and to become stressed with Leslie because of the idea that women can do things other than be mothers. Meanwhile, women laugh at Selina and these horrible expectations for women because they are aware how ridiculous these representations are and that the male fear is unfounded because men only fear these bad mothers because they cannot be controlled. Women also laugh at Leslie, because it is ridiculous to think that the expectation for a good mother is pure perfection. Overall, both Selina and Leslie emphasize that women should not feel the need to conform to societal expectations of them, so they can act

however they want. The fear of these women stems from their ability to choose their destiny. Society expects women to just be mothers and wives so when women decide to be more than that, such as to become political leaders, then society has no idea what to think of them and expects the very worst. Since women have occupied these roles for centuries, and are only fully branching out from these roles in the past century or later, society experiences anxiety-fueled panic because they no longer can rely on women to do what is expected of them. In reality, this panic could have been avoided if women were encouraged from the beginning to pursue their passions in areas that were not specifically reserved for women. Once society reaches this conclusion, it will realize that the anxiety it experiences is its own fault because it stems from the societal decision to oppress women for centuries.

### Chapter Three: Men who Fear Castration

With all of the anxiety that society experiences with the rise of female power, a prominent fear that men especially experience is the fear of castration and emasculation. Men believe that women who want to hold leadership positions in society will take away power from men in a way that men fear will emasculate them. In reality, by fearing emasculation from women, men themselves are admitting their own fragile masculinity that is susceptible to the strength of female power. Emma Watson, in her speech to the UN as a representative for the HeforShe Campaign for gender equality, made the remark, “The more I have spoken about feminism, the more I have realized that fighting for women’s rights has too often become synonymous with man-hating” (Watson). Men’s fear that women hate them is their reasoning behind the fear that women will castrate them; they think that women want to take away all of their power so that men are then portrayed as the inferior gender. In this sense, both women and feminism have mistakenly been associated with the weakening of men, rather than the equality of genders.

There is a psychological basis for this fear of castration, which is called castration anxiety. Sigmund Freud defines this anxiety as the literal male fear of losing the penis. In his own words, it is “in boys, anxiety about the penis—in girls, envy for the penis” (Freud 92). Men cling to their penises as the source of their male power, while they fear women, who lack a penis, for wanting to take that power away. The psychoanalytic perspective behind this anxiety can also be used to explain why men fear women to such an extreme degree; they see women as men without a phallus, men without power. Men are convinced that by losing power in society, the penis will lose its significance as an

indicator of supremacy and therefore undermine their authority, physically, sexually, and mentally. The definition of castration anxiety is therefore expanded to include a figurative fear of losing the sense of power that comes with being a male (*PsycholoGenie*). According to Freud, when men look at women they see a castrated male, lacking a phallus, which also causes them to be afraid because they are looking at their own worst nightmare. The fear of losing the penis leads to anxieties in other aspects of a male's life, including fear of domination, insignificance, degradation, and death. Males experience this figurative castration anxiety when women seek to obtain positions of power. Throughout history, men have occupied leadership positions in a way that demonstrates their male power to the highest degree. When men take their place as kings, the penis becomes the sword. When women decide to become leaders, men feel like they have lost the male power that comes with leadership. Now women have the sword, and they can use it to castrate men.

In addition, Sevda Caliskan gives an analysis of female exclusion from comedy that also relates to this castration anxiety that men have toward women. Caliskan analyzes the superiority theory of Thomas Hobbes which says that laughter comes from the "sudden glory" that results from a position of superiority (Caliskan 49). The Superiority Theory is based on the idea that a person laughs at the misfortunes of others because the others exist in an inferior state in society. In regard to this theory, society has perpetuated the idea that women are never superior to men, and that is why men laugh at women and treat women as a joke. When women provoke laughter toward men, they are in fact demonstrating a position of superiority over men. The laughter that Selina and Leslie direct toward the men in the show, by using humor to prove male incompetence,

inherently emasculates a man by placing him in a position of inferiority, which he is not accustomed to experiencing in a patriarchal society. Caliskan also marks the difference between male humor and female humor. She explains that male humor is generally regarded as fun, joyous, and carefree, whereas women's humor is used as a way to transform or destroy something. The negative descriptions of female humor are used by men to undermine the power of female humor as a way to castrate men and their role in society. However, as is evident with the use of humor by Leslie and Selina, humor can in fact be used to weaken the power of men.

Additionally, Caliskan explains that humor has so long been associated with jokes that are demeaning to women. According to psychologist Naomi Weisstein, "the social definition of woman as 'ridiculous person', as the butt of the joke, has always existed and is still prevalent today" (Caliskan 52). Women are presented as ridiculous as a way to take power away from them. Jokes are demeaning to women as a way to ensure that women will not be taken seriously if they try to instigate change in society. When women instead make men "the butt of the joke", men feel emasculated; they feel as if they are being put in a place that women should occupy. When men become the punch line, they are no longer able to mark women as ridiculous and therefore are no longer able to prevent women from creating revolutionary change. In *Veep* and *Parks and Rec*, Selina and Leslie act as both women in power who castrate men by holding leadership positions and the vocalizers of the jokes towards the men around them that causes a double castration of the men within the show. This castration of men within television shows both enhances the fear of castration in male viewers and proves that women also have the potential to demonstrate both their ability to be leaders and their ability to be funny.

## The Queen of Insults

Selina is portrayed as castrating and emasculating to men by the way she treats basically every single man in the show. This castration is evident in the treatment of her underlings, the men who work in the White House with her, such as Gary, Mike, Dan, Ben, Kent, and Jonah. Selina walks all over these men; she belittles them, insults them, and makes it clear that all of them are replaceable. It is obvious that Selina views all of these men as bumbling idiots who are beneath her, even when they help her with campaigns and ensure that her Vice Presidency and Presidency do not fall apart. It is funny how blatantly rude and mean that Selina is to these men. Mike is constantly berated by Selina for being an incompetent Press Secretary; Selina has no respect for him and makes it clear that she sees him as a screw up in most aspects of his job. In addition, Jonah, who works as a type of liaison between the West Wing and the Vice President's office in the first season of *Veep* and continues to be a player in the political workings of the show throughout the rest of the series, receives the brunt of the most brutal insults from Selina. Some of these insults toward Jonah, in just the first season, include, "What are you laughing at, Jolly Green Jizz Face?", "Hey, Jonah, listen, settle something for me. You like to have sex and you like to travel? Then you can fuck off.", and "Go. Period. Fuck. Period. Yourself. Exclamation point!" (Fikse). The first quotation is especially interesting in regard to the relation between the power of laughter and revolution. Selina does not allow Jonah to laugh because that power belongs to her. He does not get to laugh at her, only she can laugh at the men around her. The castrating power of Selina's own laughter acts as a way to take away authority from the men who always attempt to laugh at her and her own ridiculousness. The language that Selina uses toward Jonah is



extreme, but it symbolizes her feelings about all the men around her; they are useless and she does not view them as a representation of power. When comparing Selina to her male subordinates, Selina holds all the power and uses it to castrate those around her.

Gary, Selina's personal assistant and bag man, presents an interesting case, as Selina completely relies on him but also emasculates him in every episode. Selina verbally abuses Gary throughout the series, yet Gary still holds her in the utmost respect, even implying his love for her. Selina clearly does not return that love and emasculates Gary in almost every situation that she can. However, Gary believes that he plays an all-important role in Selina's life: he carries all her necessities in his bag, picks out her outfits, and whispers facts about people in her ear as she is meeting with public figures. The one time that Gary attempts to assert his domination and importance in their working relationship, Selina shuts him down with the following rant:

Who do you think you are, Gary Antoinette? Did somebody make you First Lady? Because I don't remember marrying you, Gary. I don't remember fucking you in Niagara Falls. I think I'd remember that. You are *unimportant*. And you have suckered onto me like some sort of a car-window Garfield. You think you're some sort of a big shot here? Oh my God, you are *not* a big shot, Gary. You are a middle-aged man who sanitizes my tweezers (Ianucci).

The language used in this denunciation of Gary makes it clear how Selina sees him: feminine, trivial, unimportant, everything a male does not want to be. Linking back to Freud's theory, the treatment that Selina exhibits towards Gary symbolically castrates him. She does not compare him to Louis XVI, she compares him to Marie Antoinette. He is not the First Man, but the First Lady. She sees him as a woman, and not even as an

important woman. Selina never has seen him as a man, she sees him as a feminized body whose only usefulness comes from superficial acts such as sanitizing tweezers.

Additionally, Selina also tends to emasculate the men who she has sexual relations with throughout the show, in order to prevent them from taking away her power. A list of Selina's male lovers includes Andrew Meyer, Selina's ex-husband, Ray Whelans, Selina's personal trainer, Charlie Baird, a banker, Tom James, Selina's candidate for Vice President, and Mohammed bin Nasser bin Khalifa Al Jaffar, the Qatari ambassador. Oftentimes, Selina sleeps with these men and uses them, both sexually and politically, to get what she wants. Although these men, especially Andrew, try to use her for their own political gains, Selina's emphasis that they are replaceable keeps her on top. This is especially poignant in Selina's treatment of her personal trainer Ray, who she literally uses just as a body to have sex with. When Selina once again gets back together with Andrew, she uses Ben, her Chief of Staff, to end her relationship with Ray. This incident makes it clear that Ray was only useful because he had a penis, but that is not a unique quality as Selina can easily find that in another man. Her emphasis on the ability to replace men puts Selina on an equal, or higher, level as her male lovers. In general, Selina's treatment of men stresses the fact that the male-power associated with having a penis is a socially constructed myth that can be taken away as soon as a woman no longer finds the penis useful.

In the example of the treatment of her lovers, Selina is not only seen in a negative light by the men who she emasculates within sexual relationships, but she is also portrayed negatively to society as a representation of the slut or whore trope. I take this aspect of the nasty woman from the unruly woman, in which "her behavior is defined by

looseness, including sexually, and she may be pregnant” (Karlyn 10). Although the nasty woman does not have to be sexually “loose”, she does have this option as she is not strictly confined to the role of the wife. This aspect of the nasty woman causes her to be denounced because she does not act like the good wife who takes care of her husband, as she is expected to do, but rather is allowed to be sexually promiscuous which is something that is not socially acceptable according to patriarchal norms. The slut also has power in her sexual promiscuity; she does not have to rely on one specific man in order to gain sexual pleasure, which add to the emasculation of men because it makes them replaceable. It is evident that Selina does in fact replace the men in her love life and move on to another one as soon as it is necessary or beneficial to her. With the exception of some relapses with Andrew, whom she seeks out various times throughout the series, Selina moves from man to man without looking back. The use of men sexually without a reliance on individual men castrates them; they are useful until they are not and then she cuts them off.

### **The Challenger to Power**

Leslie is much less castrating in general, as she loves and supports all the men who work with her in the Parks and Rec Department, but it is evident that Leslie is still portrayed as castrating to men in certain situations, especially from the point of view of the men within her town. When Leslie runs for City Council in the fourth season of *Parks and Rec*, she is often depicted as castrating and emasculating to her main opponent Bobby Newport, the rich son of the owner of the Sweetum’s Candy Factory in Pawnee. Despite being vastly under-qualified, Bobby is somehow still Leslie’s main competition in the race. During the race for City Council, Leslie has to combat the sexist comments,

gender stereotyping, and overall discrimination that is aimed at her by her opponent and the town. The main issue that Leslie experiences is that she acts in a more aggressive manner than women are typically expected to be, especially in comparison to her opponent who is very unqualified and altogether boyish, rather than manly. As a result, Leslie is portrayed as castrating to Bobby. Nichole M. Bauer, an assistant professor at Louisiana State University, discusses the two types of gender stereotypes that women experience: descriptive, which are based on observable traits of women that can be compared to those of men and prescriptive, which are behavioral expectations of women that are formed before any action is observed. In the race for City Council, Leslie's main issues are the result of prescriptive stereotypes, which she combats and deconstructs. As Bauer describes, prescriptive stereotypes have a negative impact on female candidates for political offices in the following ways:

Prescriptively, stereotypes can have negative effects for women who behave in counter-stereotypic ways. The political climate demands female candidates break with gender stereotypes to run successful campaigns and be effective legislators in office. Candidates are expected to exhibit toughness, aggressiveness, and assertiveness, but these are counter-stereotypic characteristics for women...Female candidates may choose to break stereotypic expectations, but this path is fraught with risks - female candidates may suffer a backlash for being unfeminine. Alternatively, female candidates can conform to stereotypic expectations and risk negative evaluations as a viable political contender (Bauer).

Leslie Knope does not behave in the way the town or her opponents expect to behave, meaning in a mild-mannered, non-confrontational way that is expected of women, so she makes them nervous and causes them to think that she is emasculating her opponent.

For example, in the twentieth episode of season four, Leslie participates in a debate with the other candidates for City Council. Among her opponents is a porn star, who resembles Leslie, a gun enthusiast, a radical animal rights activist, and Bobby. Leslie begins the debate by comparing herself to Bobby, saying that she can earn votes while Bobby wants to buy them. In response, Bobby, sounding extremely hurt, replies, "That hurt my feelings. You're supposed to be this positive person" (Daniels and Schur). Based on the expectation that men are the aggressors and women are timid, Bobby is taken aback that Leslie is so forceful and aggressive. It is obvious that Leslie has more power and knowledge than Bobby and this is weakening to him and to the male residents of Pawnee who are watching the debate. Even Ben, her campaign manager and husband, encourages her to be more subdued, but she refuses to give in to the gender stereotypes that would make her be less aggressive, just to avoid hurting the feelings of her less qualified and knowledgeable male opponent. Leslie's refusal to back down just because the men of her town fear the castration that causes a lessening of male power, and the fact that she wins the City Council election despite her supposed castration of Bobby, emphasizes that women have the power and ability to win a leadership position even if they, according to Freud, represent the already castrated version of men.

Once Leslie wins the race for city council, her fellow City Council members, who are all men, make it clear that they find her threatening and emasculating; in other words, they fear her. It is clear that Leslie is much more qualified to serve as City Councilwoman than any of the City Councilmen, who include Jeremy Jamm, a corrupt orthodontist, Bill DEXhart, a notorious sex addict, and Fielding Milton, a racist and sexist old man. The only other Councilman at the time is Douglass Howser, a more logical

Councilman because of the fact that he usually takes Leslie's side in votes against the other incompetent members of the Council. The incompetence of these men causes Leslie to appear as domineering on the City Council, which is humorous in the fact that the men around her are portrayed as morons who should not be in charge of leading a town in the first place. The fact that Leslie is recalled from her position on City Council adds to the idea that men fear the change that Leslie will cause by being a woman in a leadership position. Her attitude toward the other Councilmen, which they deem castrating, causes them to agree with the rest of the town that she should be recalled. Jamm even goes as far as, once again, comparing Leslie to Hitler in order to denounce her as destructive, which is obviously a ridiculous comparison. As a whole, the men did not want her to stay in power because they agreed with the belief that for Leslie to have power meant that the power of the men on the Council would be weakened, or castrated.

In addition, Leslie is also portrayed as emasculating and castrating to her husband Ben once again in the Pie-mary episode of *Parks and Rec*. Leslie must deal with the fear of castration emanating from the male rights group of Pawnee called the Male Men when she is acting in the double role as wife and town leader during Ben's campaign for a seat in Congress. When Ben decides to bake a dessert calzone in the Pie-mary instead of having Leslie make a pie, the Male Men jump to his defense because they believe that he is being castrated by his wife. The Male Men express their indignation and fear with the following phrases: "Behind every successful woman is a man she has oppressed" and "We have had enough of this feminized society. Men have had a rough go of it for...just recently" (Daniels and Schur). These men represent all of the people who are convinced that feminism and women's rights equates to male oppression. They think that Leslie is

emasculating Ben by making him perform in the Pie-mary, when in reality it was his idea to do it in the first place. He himself did not feel any emasculation, but the traditional men in town saw this act as a direct attack on men. Leslie's response sums up the counter-argument against these men's rights activists: "You're ridiculous and men's rights is nothing." (Daniels and Schur). In correlation with Caviskan's writings on women's humor, Leslie takes the descriptor of "ridiculous" and applies it to men rather than women, as it has historically been used. Men have never experienced discrimination as a result of their gender, while women have constantly experienced this discrimination throughout history, both in regard to leadership roles and humor, along with many other aspects of society. Although it sounds contradictory, Leslie's denunciation of these men, and the portrayal of these men within the show as a ridiculous and uneducated group, basically castrates the argument that female empowerment castrates men in the first place. Women do not have to castrate men in order to become powerful themselves, as is seen with Ben, but they do have the potential power to do it anyway, as is seen with the Male Men, which keeps men in constant fear.

However, to calm the worries of all the men who think all women will only bring about the castration of men, Leslie also helps to combat the castration of Jamm, a man who has always been a pain to Leslie, by an "evil woman" named Tammy. Tammy is a recurring character throughout the show who is known to be manipulative, sex-crazed, controlling, and an all-around psychopath. In a way, she is similar to Selina in her exaggerated portrayal of the bad woman. Jamm begins to date Tammy in an episode where Leslie is trying to get Jamm to vote in her favor on a land grant. Tammy does not want to help Leslie in any way, so she tells Jamm, who is completely submissive to her,

that he cannot vote in Leslie's favor. Leslie explains the situation: "The vote is tomorrow. If I don't get Jamm out form Tammy's clutches, I'm doomed! It's like rescuing a bunny from a lion, but that lion is a demonic sociopath with really nice cleavage." (Daniels and Schur). The description of Tammy as a lion and Jamm as a bunny is an emasculating, and highly accurate, explanation of the castrating relationship between Jamm and Tammy, in which Tammy has all the power. Jamm spends most of the episode crying and lamenting his life now that Tammy has control of every aspect of it. Leslie comes to the conclusion that Jamm is broken because of Tammy and so she decides to help him get back to his old self again, even though she hates his old self. The fact that Leslie works tirelessly to save Jamm from castration, even though she hates him, given that he fought to get her recalled from the City Council, highlights that all women are not going to emasculate men in order to claim positions of power. The comparison between Leslie and Tammy emphasizes how preposterous it is to think that all women will be castrating to men like Tammy is. Like the portrayal of Selina who is constantly berating and demeaning the men around her, Tammy also offers a depiction of men's worst fears. However, with the juxtaposition of Tammy and Leslie, who are two completely different types of women, the men who watch *Parks and Rec*, and men like Jamm within the show, can see that their fears cannot be universally applied to all women.

By portraying this symbolic castration of men in a funny and humorous way, with Selina's constant belittling jokes to the men around her and the hilarity of Leslie dealing with her male colleagues, the fear of castration becomes the punch line of a joke about fragile masculinity. Especially with *Veep*, it becomes a running joke in the show that men are made fun of constantly. The fact of the matter is that men hate this so much because



they are not used to being the punch line of the joke, they are used to being the ones who tell the joke. When women take positions of power and use those positions of power to make jokes about men, as is what happens within the comedies of *Veep* and *Parks and Rec*, men cannot help but feel emasculated. When women watch shows like *Veep* and *Parks and Rec*, which illustrate women in power making fun of men, it acts as a form of women's empowerment through humor that undermines the societal hierarchy that places men above women. When women see this undermining of the hierarchy they laugh, when men see it they begin to fear that they will be knocked off the top of the pyramid, that they will be castrated by these women and lose all their power. The key issue here is that men should not undermine a woman's ability to lead just because they fear that this will take power away from themselves. Until men acknowledge that females can also occupy positions of power, without supposedly taking power away from men that never belonged solely to men in the first place, then men will continue to have this irrational fear of castration from female leaders.

## Conclusion

Altogether, these three anxieties, of incompetent leaders, of abandonment of traditional female roles, and of the castration of men, mark an inherent problem in the United States. It should not be expected that women are going to exhibit these traits, just because they want to reach beyond their existence within the sphere that is typically assigned to women. Selina and Leslie act as portrayals of these anxieties, but they also subversively fight against them to assert that they should no longer exist. Broadcasted to millions of people, the humorous representations of Selina and Leslie are revolutionary; they use comedy to denounce the oppression of women to the public in a way that has the potential to implement change in society.

The fact that these anxieties are represented in mainstream comedy television shows highlights how widespread these fears are. These anxieties might not even be obvious to all viewers of *Veep* and *Parks and Rec*; viewers might not watch the two shows and think “Wow, the societal expectations toward women in power are highly problematic.” But, some people will think that. While they are laughing at the hilarity of these two shows, the viewers will start to notice these fears of women in both the show and real life and think about how these fears can be deconstructed so that they no longer continue. They will question why these fears exist and what that means about the oppression of women. These questions are what make representations of women so important, whether they are good examples or bad examples. Female representation, especially on television, offers people an opportunity to become more aware that these doubts toward women leaders exist, which then allows the viewers to discuss how these reservations impact women in the world around them. They will realize that there have

been no female leaders in the United States because of these fears and they will understand that society needs to change its perceptions of women so that women who want to become leaders are no longer restricted from achieving their true potential. Maybe one day these anxieties will cease to exist and, like Leslie Knope hopes, “Women in government will simply be seen as people in government” (Daniels and Schur). Until that day, all of the nasty women of society have to keep fighting against anyone who tells them that they are not supposed to be leaders, that they are not meant to have power in society, because these women are the ones who, once they have access to positions of power, will get shit done.

## Works Cited

- Bauer, Nichole. "Are Gender Stereotypes a Problem for Female Candidates?" *Scholars Strategy Network*, 1 Mar. 2018, [www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org/brief/are-gender-stereotypes-problem-female-candidates](http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org/brief/are-gender-stereotypes-problem-female-candidates).
- Berenson, Tessa. "Watch Donald Trump Call Hillary Clinton a 'Nasty Woman'." *Time*, 19 Oct. 2016, [time.com/4537960/donald-trump-hillary-clinton-nasty-woman-debate/](http://time.com/4537960/donald-trump-hillary-clinton-nasty-woman-debate/).
- Bock, Jarrod, et al. "The Role of Sexism in Voting in the 2016 Presidential Election." *Elsevier*, 24 July 2017, pp. 189–193.
- Caliskan, Sevda. "Is There Such a Thing as Women's Humor?" *American Studies International*, vol. 33, no. 2, Oct. 1995, pp. 49–59. *JSTOR [JSTOR]*, [www.jstor.org/stable/41279344](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41279344).
- "Castration Anxiety." *PsycholoGenie*, [psychologenie.com/castration-anxiety](http://psychologenie.com/castration-anxiety).
- "Clean Jobs Bill." *VEEP Wiki*, [veep.wikia.com/wiki/Clean\\_Jobs\\_Bill](http://veep.wikia.com/wiki/Clean_Jobs_Bill).
- Emmons, Sasha. "Dear Daughter, Here's Why I Work." *Parenting*, 13 Apr. 2013, [www.parenting.com/blogs/true-mom-confessions/sasha-emmons/why-i-work](http://www.parenting.com/blogs/true-mom-confessions/sasha-emmons/why-i-work).
- Fikse, Alyssa. "'You're Not Even A Man': The Worst Things Ever Said About Jonah On 'Veep'." *UPROXX*, UPROXX, 15 Dec. 2015, [uproxx.com/tv/14-jonah-insults-veep/14/](http://uproxx.com/tv/14-jonah-insults-veep/14/).

“The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women (1558) by John Knox.” Edited by Kevin Reed, *SWRB*, Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1995, [www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLs/firblast.htm](http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLs/firblast.htm).

Flynn, Caitlin. “Selina's Flawed Feminism On 'Veep' Highlights A Very Real Problem.” *Bustle*, Bustle, 23 Apr. 2017, [www.bustle.com/p/selinas-flawed-feminism-on-veep-highlights-a-very-real-problem-52749](http://www.bustle.com/p/selinas-flawed-feminism-on-veep-highlights-a-very-real-problem-52749).

Freud, Sigmund, et al. *Freud's "On Narcissism: an Introduction"*. Yale University Press, 1991.

Friedman, Uri. “Why It's So Hard for a Woman to Become President of the United States.” *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 12 Nov. 2016, [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/11/clinton-woman-leader-world/506945/](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/11/clinton-woman-leader-world/506945/).

Geiger, Abigail, and Lauren Kent. “Number of Women Leaders Around the World Has Grown, but They're Still a Small Group.” *Pew Research Center*, 8 Mar. 2017, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/03/08/women-leaders-around-the-world/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/03/08/women-leaders-around-the-world/).

Gowen, Pat. “Motherhood Not for All.” *Off Our Backs*, vol. 15, no. 2, Feb. 11985, pp. 24–24. *JSTOR [JSTOR]*, [www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/25775364.pdf](http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/25775364.pdf).

Gray, Emma. “How 'Nasty Woman' Became A Viral Call For Solidarity.” *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 21 Oct. 2016, [www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/nasty-woman-became-a-call-of-solidarity-for-women-voters\\_us\\_5808f6a8e4b02444efa20c92](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/nasty-woman-became-a-call-of-solidarity-for-women-voters_us_5808f6a8e4b02444efa20c92).

Hitchens, Christopher. "Why Women Aren't Funny." *Vanity Fair*, Vanity Fair, 29 Aug. 2017, [www.vanityfair.com/culture/2007/01/hitchens200701](http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2007/01/hitchens200701).

Hollander, Jenny. "'I Am A Nasty Woman' Is Trending." *Bustle*, Bustle, 22 Feb. 2018, [www.bustle.com/articles/190748-i-am-a-nasty-woman-is-the-female-empowerment-message-donald-trump-didnt-mean-to-inspire](http://www.bustle.com/articles/190748-i-am-a-nasty-woman-is-the-female-empowerment-message-donald-trump-didnt-mean-to-inspire).

Ibarra, Herminia, et al. "Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers." *Harvard Business Review*, 1 Aug. 2016, [hbr.org/2013/09/women-rising-the-unseen-barriers](http://hbr.org/2013/09/women-rising-the-unseen-barriers).

Isaak, Jo Anna. *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*. Routledge, 1997.

Karlyn, Kathleen Rowe. *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism on Screen*. University of Texas Press, 2014.

Karlyn, Kathleen Rowe. *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*. University of Texas Press, 2005.

Kulzick, Kate. "Veep Ramps Back up with Crises, Real and Imagined." *AV/TV Club*, 29 May 2016, [tv.avclub.com/veep-ramps-back-up-with-crises-real-and-imagined-1798187946](http://tv.avclub.com/veep-ramps-back-up-with-crises-real-and-imagined-1798187946).

Lawless, Jennifer L, and Richard L Fox. "Men Rule The Continued Under-Representation of Women in U.S. Politics." *American University*, American University: Women and Politics Institute, Jan. 2012, [www.american.edu/spa/wpi/upload/2012-men-rule-report-web.pdf](http://www.american.edu/spa/wpi/upload/2012-men-rule-report-web.pdf).

Lovric, Lydia. "Dear Daughter, Here's Why I Don't Work." *HuffPost Canada*, HuffPost Canada, 24 May 2015, [www.huffingtonpost.ca/lydia-lovric/stay-at-home-mom\\_b\\_6925826.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/lydia-lovric/stay-at-home-mom_b_6925826.html).

Lowen, Linda. "Sexist Media, Sexist Attacks Hurt Women in Politics." *Thought Co.*, 29 May 2017, [www.thoughtco.com/women-in-politics-sexist-media-3534284](http://www.thoughtco.com/women-in-politics-sexist-media-3534284).

*Parks and Recreation*. Created by Greg Daniels, and Michael Schur, NBC, 9 Apr. 2009.

Stanley, Alessandra. "Who Says Women Aren't Funny?" *Vanity Fair*, Vanity Fair, Apr. 2008, [www.vanityfair.com/news/2008/04/funnygirls200804](http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2008/04/funnygirls200804).

*Veep*. Created by Armando Iannucci, HBO, 22 Apr. 2012.

Verniers, Catherine, and Jorge Vala. "Justifying Gender Discrimination in the Work Place: The Mediating Role of Motherhood Myths." *PLOS One*, 9 Jan. 2018, [journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0190657](http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0190657).

Wallenfeldt, Jeff. "Helle Thorning-Schmidt." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 19 June 2015, [www.britannica.com/biography/Helle-Thorning-Schmidt](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Helle-Thorning-Schmidt).

Warner, Judith. "Fact Sheet: The Women's Leadership Gap." *American Progress*, Center for American Progress, 7 Mar. 2014, [www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2014/03/07/85457/fact-sheet-the-womens-leadership-gap/](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2014/03/07/85457/fact-sheet-the-womens-leadership-gap/).

Watson, Emma. “Emma Watson Gender Equality Is Your Issue Too.” *UN Women*, 20 Sept. 2014, [www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/9/emma-watson-gender-equality-is-your-issue-too](http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/9/emma-watson-gender-equality-is-your-issue-too).

Zhang, Christine, et al. “Liar,' 'Corrupt,' 'Capable' – The Words You Used to Describe Hillary Clinton.” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, Aug. 2016, [www.latimes.com/projects/la-na-pol-quotes-about-clinton/](http://www.latimes.com/projects/la-na-pol-quotes-about-clinton/).